

THE DAY THE FBI CAME TO OUR HOUSE

America's Security Police in Action

HARRY GERSH

IT WAS about two-thirty in the afternoon of a warm Saturday a couple of months ago when the FBI came to our house. I was weeding the pachysandra, wearing an old pair of gray flannels and an army shirt. Smoking a pipe, of course. Four kids on three bicycles and a pedal jeep came by with an awful racket. Up the street the older kids were trying out the footballs they had unearthed from the pile of baseball equipment. The lawns were sunny but the sidewalks were in shade. Down the middle of the street there was a long, thin, dappled runner of sun where the trees didn't quite meet overhead.

A blue 1950 Pontiac sedan pulled up in front of the doctor's house across the street from my pachysandra. I knew the doctor didn't have office hours Saturday afternoon, so I turned to see who was coming to visit whom. (A small amount of neighborly busybodyness is acceptable in Tuckahoe.) Two men sat in the front seat of the car. They looked up and down the street, casually, but they didn't look at me or my house. Then they got out and walked directly across the street toward me. Somehow I knew better than to act surprised, so I stood up and turned to meet them.

The man who had been driving was in the

lead. He wore brown. Brown, rubber-soled shoes; brown gabardine slacks, a button-down oxford shirt with striped rep tie; tan slipover; tan herringbone jacket; a brown hat. He looked like a happy, healthy, wealthy Irishman. He wasn't, in fact, Irish, and he could hardly have been wealthy. But he was certainly healthy. The second man was just that, a sort of professional second man. He wore brown too. Brown shoes; a brown worsted suit with a faint stripe and with a vest; a white shirt with a small-figured brown tie; tan topcoat and a brown hat. He had a gold chain between the two bottom pockets of his vest. He was long-faced and wore steel-rimmed glasses.

The lead man, we'll call him Mr. Walsh, smiled at me and said, "Good afternoon." The second man, Mr. Brown, grunted. I just smiled.

"You're Mr. Gersh? Harry Gersh?" Mr. Walsh asked. I nodded. "We're from the FBI." I gawked. Remembering back, I think they cast steely, all-encompassing glances up and down the street, Mr. Walsh looking south, Mr. Brown looking north, as the letters "FBI" were uttered. But I'm not sure. Mr. Walsh did ask hurriedly whether we couldn't go into the house. I nodded, maybe I grunted. Anyway, I did lead them into the house.

After three years in the navy I am not easily surprised, astonished, or shocked. But the navy had never prepared me for this situation. While I walked up the steps I searched feverishly back into time. What had I done, advertently or inadvertently? Into what great danger had I brought my country? I played football until 1932, and was an active anti-Commie after that. I had returned every registered publication sent to me by the navy. I often think of robbing

CAME the 1950's, and thousands of quite law-abiding Americans found themselves undergoing an experience novel to the American scene: the FBI came to their homes and asked them to talk about someone they knew—not in the way of idle gossip, but to help fill out an FBI dossier. Here, HARRY GERSH tells of such a visit, and describes how he and his wife felt about it. Mr. Gersh is assistant educational director of the Textile Workers of America (CIO) and has been a frequent contributor to COMMENTARY.

one of the three banks I pass on my way to work, but I never have and, besides, they're state banks. I burst into a sweat as I remembered the radar timer I had used as a clock in my workroom. But it was broken now and couldn't ever have been important enough for the FBI. They said the captain had decommissioned his gig and taken it home and no one had fussed about that. I couldn't think of a thing that would bring the FBI to my door on a Saturday afternoon even if they did look like all the commuters who got on my train at Bronxville. I hadn't thought of anything by the time we were inside and hidden from the neighbors.

As soon as he was inside, Mr. Walsh showed me his credentials. They looked innocent enough, not even a silver badge. Just a "... this is to certify ..." and a picture which might have been anyone's. I didn't examine it too closely and I wasn't in a mood to do much comparing. I always trembled when an immigration officer looked too closely at my passport picture.

MY WIFE, Violet, hearing visitors, came smiling and bustling into the living room. She looked flushed, pretty, and incongruous. She was flushed because she'd just put a cake into the oven; pretty because she is; incongruous because of a too gay apron covering the top of rolled-up dungarees. I introduced her anyway.

To the FBI men I said, "This is my wife, Violet." I felt they probably knew too much about me for me to use the formal "Mrs. Gersh."

To Violet I said, "These men are ... they're from ... uh ... FBI." The FBI came out on a rising note. Violet looked at them as if they were human and said hello.

Mr. Walsh was still smiling. He asked, "Were you formerly Violet Eberil?" I gawked again. It's been sixteen years since my wife was known as Violet Eberil. It was scary having the FBI recall her maiden name. We weren't even married in New York. Violet nodded. I was afraid to look at her. Mr. Walsh continued, "It's you we've really come to see. May we talk to you?"

I heard Johnny come through the back door and I was thankful that the glass decided to stay together this time. He came through the kitchen at a dead run, rounded the turn into the dining room and pulled up short in the living-room door with a gun in each hand, a scowl on his face. "Reach," he commanded. Then he saw the FBI men and was embarrassed. He looked at them sideways and asked, "Who are those men, Daddy?"

How do you tell a four-year-old that the FBI has come to question his mother about some secret of her past? A secret so dark that even his father doesn't have an inkling as to what it might be. How do you explain to one of the brightest lights of the Sarah Lawrence College Nursery School that his mother is in the toils of the federal internal security police? I picked up Johnny and sat him on my knee.

"They're men," I said flatly.

"What men?"

"They came to ask Mommy and Daddy some questions. Go outside and play."

"No. I want to hear."

I knew enough not to press the point. Johnny stayed to hear. So did I, though for a moment I thought the FBI would ask me to leave. Afterward, I wondered what I would have done if they had asked me to leave them alone with my wife. Refused? Agreed? Called a lawyer?

Mr. Brown took a corner chair and sort of faded into it. During the hour and a half that they were there he didn't say more than three sentences. Most of the time I forgot that he was there. Maybe we were supposed to forget Mr. Brown.

Mr. Walsh put us at our ease. A little too easily, perhaps. He said that they were looking for information but that it had nothing to do with us personally. Somehow that didn't make me feel better. It had an even more ominous sound. Walsh joked with Johnny but Johnny didn't respond. He talked about how pleasant was the day and how nice our living room. Then he said, "Mrs. Gersh, does the Bronx Free Fellowship mean anything to you?"

THIS time both my wife and I gawked. We gawked at each other. We laughed. We both started to talk at once. Mr. Walsh cut me out neatly and quickly. He wasn't interested in me at all.

The Bronx Free Fellowship was a church, a debating society, a Friday evening social, and an intellectual circus. It was wonderful. As we remembered, it was run by a Unitarian minister who preached a social gospel, as who didn't during the depression? After some sort of non-denominational, non-partisan services, the congregation would debate an important issue of the day: How to Cure the Depression, Socialism vs. Communism, Apples or Public Ownership, Moses, Jesus, or Marx, Planned Parenthood.

After it had been running for a while the members of the Fellowship divided roughly into four groups—Communist, Socialist, independent radicals too wild-eyed even to adhere to the splinter groups, and a fourth section of see-both-sides, can't-make-up-my-mind, you're-both-a-little-right liberals. The BFF was a wonderful training ground for street-corner speakers, for building logical positions on illogical premises, and for sharpening the retort discourteous of the heckler. It was Union Square with a chairman and a roof. But there was no solid membership in the BFF, there was no movement to win control over, so the Socialists and Communists and others could meet together without anything stronger than a nasty word. All this was at its peak in the early 30's. And now the FBI asked my wife did it mean anything to her.

Violet finished gawking at me and said, "Yes, the Bronx Free Fellowship does mean something to me."

"What?"

"It was an organization I belonged to. I went to the Fellowship meetings a long time ago."

Bit by patient bit, the patience on both sides, Violet explained the Fellowship and her place in it to the FBI. It was a slow job, but complete. I watched Mr. Walsh to see if he believed her story. I couldn't tell. But he kept going back, over and over again,

digging deeper, asking for the same thing in other words. I didn't like it.

FOR all Mr. Walsh's boyish good looks and open face, there was something unhealthy about the whole thing. It bothered me and I could sense that it bothered my wife. In the constant digging back for minutiae they seemed to be building somebody's coffin out of coral. And we didn't know whose. Or maybe it was last week's headlines about McCarthy that colored our feelings.

Mr. Walsh had many verses to his song but he kept repeating a single chorus: "Who? Who? Who?" Violet would say, "We did so-and-so." Walsh would immediately jump in with "Who did so-and-so? Who said that? Which friends went with you?" Every time this happened Violet looked helplessly at me. I knew quite well why she looked helpless. She just didn't remember. She never does. Any day now I expect to come home, have her kiss me, and say, "It's silly, dear, but I just can't think of your name." But Mr. Brown, sitting back, watching us as if through a microscope, probably didn't believe her protestations that she didn't remember. He probably thought she was looking at me for strength or instructions.

This constant "who, who, who?" didn't help Violet in trying to recall names. One of the active BFFers is still a friend of ours. We see him fairly frequently. In the middle of the questioning Violet couldn't remember his name. I helped her out. I don't know whether Mr. Walsh's glance at me was thanks or warning. And even when we did remember names there was a hesitation. Why do they want to know? What trouble are we getting these people into? There was something lousy about the whole business.

After a time Mr. Walsh gave up the indirect approach. I could have told him it wouldn't work on Violet. He came out with it: "As we understand it, Mrs. Gersh, there were two main groups in the BFF. A Communist group and a socialistic group."

That did it. My wife and I have usually voted for Norman Thomas. We were members of the Socialist party. We are still friendly to it and its principles. But there is one thing we are unfriendly to—that's the word "socialistic" and anyone using it. Perhaps this is neurotic but it's a widespread neurosis. There probably isn't any such word. In any case it grates on all Socialists and most others who have intelligent knowledge of the political movements of our country. I have never heard the word "socialistic" used by a person who knew what he was talking about.

Violet and I looked at each other again. This time it wasn't for help, it was understanding. We knew why Mr. Walsh used "socialistic." His records showed that we were Socialists and he didn't think that that was a nice thing to be. He was trying to spare our feelings. So he softened the blow by calling Violet's group the "socialistic" one. That didn't soften the blow at all. It just hardened us. Up to that moment we were two citizens anxiously trying to help the aura-surrounded intelligence officers of our government. After the "socialistic" we were a couple of citizens having to put up with a couple of cops a little out of their depth—and likely to make costly mistakes. We may have been unfair. Then again, we may have been eminently fair. It was lousy.

Violet agreed that there had been a Communist and a Socialist group in the BFF. She volunteered the fact that she had been an active speaker and applauder (very important since there were no votes taken) for the Socialist group. They dragged through that for a while, and again Mr. Walsh found out that the indirect method wouldn't work.

"Who led the Communists, Mrs. Gersh? Who spoke for them? Names, names."

Violet was blank again. She really was. I was used to it. Mr. Walsh wasn't. It didn't seem to sit too well with the FBI. Some direct questions and then some indirect. They could neither catch her (their view, I think) nor awaken her memory (my view).

"I can't remember their names. I can't even remember their faces," she told them.

JOHNNY had been sitting on my lap through all this. Suddenly he entered the conversation. "Who are they, Daddy?" I was struck again. I thought of policemen but decided against it. I had a bright idea. "They're detectives." But there are large gaps, unexpected gaps in the education of a four-year-old. Johnny knows all about cowboys, space rovers, baseball, babies, money, and soldiers. Detectives he doesn't know. They don't have uniforms. So I tried again. "They're FBI men." I started to explain about the FBI. Mr. Walsh interrupted.

"Don't make a point of it, Mr. Gersh," he warned. Later I worried over why the FBI didn't want Johnny to know that they had come to question his mother. I wasn't ashamed.

About half an hour after they started the questioning the FBI gave up the indirect method and the direct indirect method. We still hadn't the faintest idea why they had come. Suddenly Mr. Walsh told us.

"Mrs. Gersh, does the name Philip Baird mean anything to you?"

Violet and I gawked again. It was our favorite expression that Saturday afternoon. Violet smiled, then she giggled, got flustered, became a little frightened, and finally answered, "It does."

Philip Baird, which isn't his real name or his professional name, is a Hollywood figure. He starved and fought his way through the professional schools, made a deserved reputation for himself on Broadway, and went to Hollywood. He's done all right for himself there too. During Violet's first years in college she was his girl friend. No, I'd better put it the other way. He was her boy friend. They were a pair for two years. Then, according to the story I get, she told him to git. Seems there was another, etc., etc. They hadn't seen each other in twenty years. During the time of the Spanish Civil War and the Moscow Trials Baird's name was publicized in some Commie fronts, causes, and benefit performances. The same can

be said for half the people in Hollywood. They saw *Bury the Dead* and *The Grapes of Wrath* and became great humanitarian souls and greater political brains. I thought Baird was a fool, didn't like his politics, but didn't know anything about him except what was in the public press. Violet knew no more than I did. Now, after twenty years, Mr. Walsh wanted to know if the name Philip Baird meant anything to her.

WITH everything out in the open, Mr. Walsh again reassured us that the whole thing had nothing to do with us personally. They were seeking information about Baird. They didn't care what we were or what we disclosed about ourselves. They protested too much. I wondered about the ethics of that, since everyone is worrying about the ethics of government.

My wife, bless her, is herself a handy one with questions. Now she turned on the FBI and wanted to know why she and why Baird and why the Bronx Free Fellowship. But the FBI wasn't answering that day. They were asking. So, since we were the hosts, we answered.

"What," asked the FBI with downcast eyes, "was the relationship between Violet and Baird?" Having a Hollywood boy friend, or a boy friend who made good in Hollywood, is nothing to be ashamed of in America. So Violet gave it to him straight.

"The relationship was personal," she said. Then she let out a shriek. Even Mr. Brown looked interested at that. Violet shrieked, jumped up, and rushed for the kitchen yelling, "My cake! My cake!" There was some clattering in the kitchen, the usual soft oaths as she burned her hands, and she came back carrying a tin cake-pan but smiling.

"My cake almost burned," she explained.

Mr. Walsh laughed. "We cause more cakes to burn. . . ."

After Violet had finished messing with things in the kitchen and making the short prayer all women make that the cake wouldn't fall, she came back to the living room and the questioning. They went back

to Philip Baird in 1932-1934. She told the story quite willingly. No, Baird hadn't been a member of the BFF. He had been too busy with other things. In fact, if he had ever come to a BFF meeting, he came because Violet took him. It was fun and free. Baird was completely apolitical in those years. If anything, a little on the reactionary side. Violet's mother, who had a wholesome down on the "interests," had looked askance at Baird because he was such a right-winger.

Walsh broke down Violet's story seven ways. But every time he built it up again with a new set of questions it came out the same. Baird just didn't have it politically.

In the middle of that episode Mr. Walsh was struck by a new idea. "Would you have known if Baird was a Communist?"

Violet's answer was almost automatic. "Of course."

"How?"

Violet looked at me again. The question seemed silly to her. "By what they said. By their attitudes and stands on issues. By how they argued. By a lot of things."

"What things?" The FBI is nothing if not specific. I wondered how they did with other female questionees.

Violet shrugged her shoulders and looked at me. This time for help.

"You develop a sort of sixth sense when you live with them for a while," I volunteered. They jumped on that "live with them" phrase. I explained that I meant constant meetings in school, student organizations, clubs, fraternal groups, unions. Everything had had a Communist and an anti-Communist, Socialist-led caucus back in those days. But obviously the FBI didn't believe in any sixth sense. Mr. Walsh explained it by using words like "evidentiary" and "situs." He really did.

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lack of knowledge. The FBI men went back to work. They tried an entirely new tack.

The continual rehashing of a story I already knew began to get boring. Johnny was squirming like a fresh-caught flounder. But he wouldn't leave his mother with those men. He didn't seem to trust me to protect her. I tried to figure out the FBI method. First, by getting Violet to talk freely about the BFF, they tried to trap her into naming Baird. Then, without mentioning him, they tried to get her to name him among the known Communists in the BFF. When that didn't work they put it directly. Now they were working on his financial situation. It puzzled me for a while, then I figured that they were trying to find out if he had been a plausible target for Communist recruitment. They failed there too.

"He was broke," Violet said. "So broke I had to pay for the movies when we went. He used to come up to the house for dinner, and it wasn't merely social. He needed the meal. He had a scholarship at the professional school and worked a bit on the side. But he was starving most of the time."

I don't know what Mr. Walsh did during the depression but his experiences were not the same as ours. He acted as if Violet were baring a dark, and not nice, secret when she told of paying for Baird. She wasn't embarrassed. Neither was I. She used to pay for me sometimes when I was broke. Maybe the FBI doesn't approve of these things.

After that it was like going around on the carrousel after the novelty has worn off. The same questions with the words in different places. Sometimes with the question mark hidden. The story didn't change. Philip Baird had been Violet's boy friend. He had never spoken at the BFF, at least in her memory. He was completely without politics while she knew him.

At the end Mr. Walsh asked that toughest of questions again: "Would you tell us if you knew?"

We both said yes. I guess it's true.

An hour and a half after they had come,

they got up to leave. Johnny helped by asking, "Why don't they go, Daddy?"

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I guess politeness and a wish to be pleasant to someone whose afternoon you've wasted made Mr. Walsh say what he did. "Well, Mrs. Gersh," he said, "that's all behind you now."

Violet looked peculiar. I could have warned him but I didn't know how. I don't remember the exact words he used next, so I won't put quotation marks around them, but this is the sense of the comment:

You're clean now, Mrs. Gersh. You've been mixed up in some rather shady things in the past, Socialists, Communists, but it must have been youthful wildness. You're well rid of it, as we can see from this house and this street and talking to you. You can depend on us to keep it quiet. No one will know about your record.

It was the wrong thing to say to anyone with our background, especially Violet. "Mr. Walsh," she said loudly and distinctly, "I've got a good record, regardless of what the FBI thinks, and I'm proud of it." She went on in that vein for a while. She was working herself up to the point where she'd be sorry she voted for Roosevelt instead of Thomas. But I could see that neither Mr. Walsh nor Mr. Brown understood what they had done nor why Violet was being so vociferous, so I broke in to say our good-byes. I had to edge Violet back into the house. The FBI men waved once going across the street, got into their car, and drove off.

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